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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TACTICS

ECONOFICTION BLOCKADE, CAPITALISM, CIRCULATION, CIRCULATION STRUGGLE,
COVID 19, STRIKE

The recent “Freedom Convoy” of Canadian truckers and their fellow travelers — the technical term is a “clustertruck” — no doubt drew on 2018’s *gilets jaunes* movement in shutting down the Ambassador Bridge and three other border spans, along with various other stoppages consistently described as “occupations,” in protest against government vaccination mandates. But it is likely they also recalled the history of Indigenous border blockades that began in earnest with the Cornwall Bridge blockade in 1968 by the Kanien’kéhaka of Akwesasne.

It is beyond likely, certain even, that the cod insurrectionists of January 6th had in the forefront of their minds, as both antagonist and example (a true episode of love/hate madness, the love steadfastly denied and everywhere evident), the previous summer's George Floyd Uprising — and thus carried into the Capitol that uprising's many precursors from Watts in 1965 to Ferguson in 2014 and beyond.

Occupations, riots, critical infrastructure blockades. These are fundamental among the tactics elsewhere called circulation struggles: requiring no privileged access to the production process, unfolding in ambiguously public space policed by the state, often interfering with the circulation of commodities. These tactics have ancient provenances but have since the sixties and seventies increasingly oriented the repertoire of collective action in the west. While they may have certain political tendencies embedded in their form to which they are more likely to attach, such tactics do not feature an intrinsic relation to a specific politics in the same way, unlike a strike, e.g., which implies the action of workers as workers.

This is both their strength and their weakness. Circulation struggles are open to all comers, more or less. But, in recent years, they have been popularly associated with what Immanuel Wallerstein called “antisystemic movements,” often militant. To see, then, these tactics migrate across the political spectrum (in so far as the spectrum is still operative, a significantly related question) is inevitably uncanny. Since the high-water mark of Summer 2020, and the relative quiescence of left militancy since the repression of the George Floyd Uprising, such tactics have made their way to the right, borne by movements whose language of liberty both refers to and demands an even more virulently reactionary state than currently on offer.

It is a curious fact of the present in the capitalist core: *the circulation struggle, but make it nationalist*.

The question of how tactics travel has been much debated. Rarely is it as direct as Group B noticing the effective maneuver of Group A and adopting it outright. Or rather, that is exactly what happens — but how does it happen that way? Why is Group A's tactic effective in the first place, and why among all the effective tactics of the last decade or five does Group B select that one? And why does it prove effective again, in what seems like a different political context? One well-known pronouncement from the Invisible Committee insists that “Revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination but by *resonance*.” This sounds deep but is literally superficial: it imagines the problem in two dimensions, a surface across which events “spread,” albeit not by contact and adjacency but leaping discontinuously according to vibes.

The surface resemblance of events provides evidence only of correlation, however. Causation, if it is to be found, is more subterranean, buried down in the third dimension. It names a circumstance, a shared set of historical forces that drive events upward into sunlight in these particular forms. These forms are not provided by the actors' positions on the political spectrum but by real conditions that present some tactics as more viable, accessible, effective. And because the most powerful conditions often obtain most broadly, the tactics that they propose

are likely to appear in all manner of places, used by all manner of groupings. To choose a single example: if the necessity for frictionless and fast commodity transport has been more and more visible in the era of the logistics revolution, then the pandemic lit up global supply chains until you could see them in all their fragility from the next galaxy. Circulation struggles have migrated toward reaction, or rather have spread themselves across the spectrum, according to what is in some sense a very simple reason: struggles happen at the points of vulnerability for a planetary political economy, and at the points of contact where populations are managed. And these have shifted for everyone, not just for the people with whom we might feel some affinity or solidarity.

Without rehearsing what is a fairly elaborate argument, the capacity to manage populations in the postindustrial core via wage discipline has been persistently on the wane. The much-ballyhooed unemployment rates cannot disguise the persistently depressed rates of labor force participation and hollowing of full-time employment. The particular misery that is capitalist exploitation continues apace. But forms of management associated with the colony — the direct violence of state power — have become increasingly central to enforcing social order in the metropole, much as Aimé Césaire foresaw seventy years ago his *Discourse on Colonialism*. This is not a freely made choice but a foreseeable path given capital's limited capacity to internalize new labor inputs profitably. That is to say, *pace* debates regarding how intensifications of policing fall on the population, that the form and scope of contemporary policing provide a useful example of how the forces of state violence are (like their antagonists) constrained in their tactics.

This is moreover true for capital in its efforts to seize profit. In the same period of explosive growth in policing and incarceration, and for the same reasons (concerning capitalism's necessity, in the face of waning global accumulation, to seek countervailing measures to declining profits that include decreasing costs of circulation, accelerating turnover time, and cheapening inputs), the global political economy has in many ways intensified the pressures on extractivist gambits, logistical command, and massive infrastructural buildouts, toward capitalist projects operating at a speed and scale requiring state coordination and state force.

Understanding the constraints on struggles in this way should, one hopes, guard against any reflexive extension of sympathy to a given tactic. Blockades will be central to any successful social movement toward liberation, but this does not make blockades inherently liberatory. Ditto occupations, rebellions, even storming the Capitol.

And yet one sometimes encounters such sympathy among those who identify with the antistate position. The wholesale rejection of any state intervention, in what has become by now a self-proclaimed conspiracism, has its exponents also across the political spectrum, matching the traverse of tactics with which we began. Among left intellectuals, this conspiracism has no better-known exponent than Giorgio Agamben, of late joined by the Invisible Committee, a group which may or may not include former students of the philosopher. Such positions align with a reflexive antistatism existing past the left end of the political spectrum (many anarchist

friends of mine, i.e., would decline to identify with the left and for good reason); they also appear to align with the purportedly popular antistatism of movements like the Freedom Convoy, which has in turn drawn some sympathy from the antistate left.

So then, we see the complicated entanglement: the Freedom Convoy (and arguably the January 6th pseudocoup) seems both to announce an antistate politics and to draw on tactics identified with direct antistate struggle. Why wouldn't someone who harbored a fundamental mistrust of the state — or for that matter someone who believed that even if it were ethically neutral, the form of the state could no longer intimate liberatory potential — find in these recent events, circulation struggles on the right, something toward which one might be quite sympathetic?

One answer to this riddle would pass through enemy-of-my-enemy politics which, after all, collapse rather easily. One might share a general principle — for example, that the state should not have the authority to decide who can and cannot earn a wage, in a society where food costs money — without imagining that the reactionaries propose any liberatory project. Neither do they design even incidentally to fray the fibers of state power. Over and over they have made clear that they would in fact prefer an even more authoritarian state, DeSantis to Hochul, Roman Baber to Trudeau. Those who wanted to hang the vice president and fight the capitol police simply identified Pence and those cops as antistate, as traitors to the true nation. What we see is a struggle between competing visions of how the state should impose its rule, and identification with either is simply taking the state's side. As with the Januaryists of 2021, the Freedom Convoy has affirmed that they wish for a great restoration of order, just, the kind they like: archists of the first water.

More significant than recognizing in the moment who is and is not an authoritarian statist, however, is the exaggeration of state power which precedes that moment. Confronting some of Agamben's more implausible claims about biopolitical domination, which peak with analogy of vaccine proof to the yellow star worn by Jews in the concentration camps, the insightful Benjamin Bratton counterposed a "positive biopolitics." Adam Kotsko, one of Agamben's translators, offered a sustained and thoughtful engagement that in the end found in Agamben the failure to suppose the possibility of coordinated state action warding against, rather than productive, of bare life.

But these approaches too hypostatize the state, even if they do not fetishize its power and autonomy in the same degree. Paradoxically, the expansion of state violence in the capitalist core described above signifies its real weakness and lack of autonomy. The modern state, as Adam Smith pointed out early on, has always been charged with coordinating the interests of capital as a whole, with negotiating its contradictions, and this gives the state much of its shape. In the period of the pandemic, the most dramatic of these contradictions has been that between the short-term need to force enough people into the workplace such that capital would not collapse where it stood quaking; and the long-term need for a workforce healthy enough to produce goods, services, and surplus value next year and next decade (it is regarding this tension

between capital's immediate needs and its conditions for survival that the pandemic truly resembles climate collapse).

Given this, the panicked and panting oscillations of state policy — churning at every level from school district and county to province and nation — do not describe the contrary pulls between sensible and horrifying, better and worse, the good and bad state. “Oscillation” is just the name for leaping between the two sides of a contradiction that the state cannot resolve. This maddened and maddening series of spasms, so visible and so grievous, certainly provides the *seeming* that the state (or The State) is the source of these jagged pronouncements and counterpronouncements, new ones every week, mandates and reversals, here the domination of the latest decree, there the vulnerable forced into pandemic exposure, and on and on. Meanwhile, vast swathes of humanity, “essential workers” most obviously, face the contradiction between dying from SARS-CoV-2 and dying from starvation.

For Agamben, it is the camps, always the camps, that provide paradigm and allegory. If the ethico-theoretical order of the world must be arbitrated according to the European Holocaust, and I am not sure that it does, it is implausible to register this as the story of the state, much less the state of exception. “At the end of capitalism, which is eager to outlive its day,” clarifies Césaire in the passage mentioned above, “there is Hitler.” This reference seems far more germane than the present claims of the various states at war in the Ukraine, pointing at each other per the Spiderman meme and crying “Hitler” with every breath.

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